

A RESPONSE TO *WAYS* AND THE SYNTAX OF  
NOUN PHRASES IN QĪNGHǎI CHINESE DIALECTS

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ABSTRACT

In the course of offering a review of Zhāng Chéngcái's *Ways*, this paper describes the syntax of noun phrases in the Chinese dialect of Huángshuǐ, in Qīnghǎi Province. Unlike other Chinese dialects, this dialect employs several postpositions for indicating syntactic nominal relationships. The origin of this phenomenon in contact with non-Sinitic languages in the region and its significance are also explored.

KEY WORDS

Chinese dialects, Qīnghǎi, syntax, language contact,  
Monguor, Amdo Tibetan

## INTRODUCTION

For more than twenty years, Professor Zhāng Chéngcái 张成材 has made steady, enduring contributions to the description of Qīnghǎi Chinese dialects, including the *Xīníng Fāngyán zhì* 西宁方言志 (1987, in collaboration with Zhū Shìkuī 朱世奎) and the *Xīníng Fāngyán Cídiǎn* 西宁方言词典 (1994). In this paper, we will discuss Zhāng's (2006) most recent contribution—'Ways of Expression of Prepositions and their Related Meanings in Xīníng Dialect of Qīnghǎi', (hereafter *Ways*), with the aim of supplementing this important treatise where possible, while simultaneously furthering the discussion it raises where necessary. It is hoped through the course of this discussion to more sharply delineate the extent of what is known about the grammar of the dialect, and point toward what matters are further in need of investigation.

We begin by considering several general claims *Ways* makes about the dialect and its investigation. Then we will consider the description of the 'prepositions' (which is the standard translation for the term *jiècí* 介词, but which we will see is perhaps not most appropriate in this context) that *Ways* provides, and supplement or reorganize it, as necessary. Finally, we consider the larger value that *Ways* has in understanding the field of Qīnghǎi Chinese dialects, and by extension, its value to the larger field of China studies.

## WAYS CLAIMS

### *Geographic Scope of the Study*

*Ways* is to be applauded for the clarity with which it sets out to define the scope of its description, stating that it purports to be an account of 'prepositions' in the dialect of

the city of Xīníng. However, in the course of its definition, the paper is both too narrow and too broad. In addition to urban Xīníng the Chinese dialects of Qīnghǎi Province are reported to be spoken in the following counties: Dàtōng 大通, Huángyuán 湟源, Huángzhōng 湟中, Píng'ān 平安, Guìdé 贵德, Ményuán 门源, Lèdū 乐都, Mínhé 民和, Hùzhù 互助, Huàlóng 化隆, Xúnhuà 循化, and Tóng rén 同仁.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the vocabulary and grammar of the Chinese dialects of this region are reported to maintain a high degree of uniformity, with the exception of Xúnhuà, which is part of the so-called Hézhōu 河州 dialect group. *Ways* claims, then, that while its description of prepositions is that of the Xīníng dialect, it can serve as a description of the entirety of Chinese dialects in Qīnghǎi Province.

In certain important ways, most notably the core lexicon and general phonological system, the city of Xīníng overlaps considerably with its neighboring areas. However, in other important ways, there are differences between the two. Zhāng Chéngcái (1984) most clearly delineates the sub-dialects of the region based on tonal, phonological, and lexical grounds. This sub-classification results in three categories: the aforementioned Hézhōu huà 河州话, which includes the counties of Huàlóng, Xúnhuà, and Tóng rén; the Lèdū-Mínhé section (primarily a three-tone dialect group); and the Xīníng group, including Píng'ān, Hùzhù, Dàtōng, Huángyuán, Huángzhōng, Guìdé, and urban Xīníng. This analysis was based on solid linguistic data, and largely accords with popular perceptions in Qīnghǎi. For these

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<sup>1</sup> Hǎidōng 海东 Region consists of Hùzhù Monguor (Tǔ 土) Autonomous County, Huàlóng Huí 回 Autonomous County, Píng'ān County, Lèdū County, Mínhé Huí and Monguor (Tǔ) Autonomous County, and Xúnhuà Salar Autonomous County. Xīníng City consists of Huángzhōng County, Dàtōng Huí and Monguor (Tǔ) Autonomous County, Huángyuán County, and the more urban areas of Xīníng.

reasons, unless compelling evidence to the contrary is provided, we believe this tripartite division should be adhered to in making claims about the 'Chinese dialects of Qīnghǎi'.

When it comes to making claims about the syntax of the dialect, clarity is even more important, because within the sub-dialects described above, meaningful differences exist. For example, there is an important isogloss that runs through western Huángzhōng County, around the town of Duōbà 多巴 that divides Xīníng's urban variety from that of the more rural west. The isogloss divides those dialects within the larger Xīníng group that have a distinct topic marker [xɔ] (transcribed in *Ways* as 荷; transcribed here as 呵) and the nominal marker [xa] (transcribed as 哈, but with a reported variant [a] 啊) from those to the west that merge them (Dede 2007b).

Another problem is a feeling among old Xīníng residents that there are clear differences between the dialect of the city and that of the surrounding countryside expressed to this researcher when investigating the use of prepositions and postpositions in the region. Further, as remarked in a review of Zhāng (1994), certain examples from the text sound as if they are from an area outside of Xīníng where there are mixed populations of Hàn 汉 and Tibetan (Cháo Shēngxiáng 巢生祥 1998). For these reasons it seems *Ways* is both too broad and too narrow in its definition of the scope of its subject. Until we have a more detailed picture of the varieties of Chinese spoken in and around Xīníng, the best we can do is to be clear as to the provenance of our data. Over time this will allow us to accurately assess claims of whether the syntax of the Xīníng dialect is markedly different from its neighbors.

*Demographic Scope of the Study*

Second, we agree wholeheartedly with *Ways* in its claim that one must separate out 'written Chinese' (*shūmiànyǔ* 书面语) when doing research on the dialect, or certain special features of the dialect will not be revealed. However, the further claim that, in doing research on the dialect "...[one] must take fifty to sixty year old people as the basis (*bìxū yǐ wǔ liùshí yǐshàng de lǎorén wéi yījù* 必须以五六十以上的老人为依据)" is less justified. This claim reflects both a presupposition about dialectology in general and a demonstrable fact about the Xīníng dialect in particular. The Xīníng dialect is changing rapidly in all aspects of its grammar, including phonology, lexicon, and syntax, undoubtedly due to changes in the population of Xīníng since 1949 (Dede 1999a, 2006). There is little doubt that the Xīníng dialect of the twenty-first century is very different from the Xīníng dialect of the middle of the twentieth century.

The presupposition about dialectology is that the goal of the discipline is to ascertain, describe, codify, and preserve some 'pure' or 'original' variety of speech indicative of an area. In fact, dialects, whether referring to characteristics of regional or social varieties of speech, are constantly in flux, changing gradually from generation to generation, or changing rapidly in response to external 'shocks' that radically alter the linguistic environment. The goal of dialectology cannot be to uncover and record an original variety, because constant change over time renders the notion of dialectal originality a myth. Therefore, we must rely on standards other than simply the age of a speaker to determine whether the language produced is representative. *Ways* itself recognizes this. The very first example of dialect speech that it offers as evidence is from a seven or eight year old boy.

What then is the goal of dialectology? There are at least two larger questions we may use our fieldwork results to pursue. First, there are the questions of how and why language varieties change; i.e., the question of what internal linguistic mechanisms facilitate or hinder particular linguistic changes. Second, there is the issue of the relationship between a linguistic variety and the speech community that uses it. Dialectology helps us understand the changes that a speech community has undergone, and connects that with other aspects of the community's socio-cultural evolution. It is in this last regard that *Ways* and the study of Qīnghǎi Chinese dialects in general make an important contribution.

### *Systemicity*

*Ways* makes an important point in stating that the study of Xíníng dialect grammar must be undertaken in a comprehensive manner. That is, one should not simply discuss a particular phenomenon in isolation. By way of example, *Ways* points out that the controversy surrounding 'pre-posed objects' in the dialect is intimately connected with the explanation of 'prepositions'. While we agree with this last example, we are unsure as to how to evaluate the general claim. Is it possible to describe a dialect's syntax *in toto*, without first analyzing it into subparts? Certainly, syntactic issues are related to each other, but without some analytical foothold it is impossible to initiate a description. We choose to understand *Ways* meaning in this regard to be that one must consider all the prepositions together in understanding the system of prepositions.

Unfortunately, *Ways* itself falls short of this ideal in two regards. First, one 'preposition' [xa] 哈, is not treated in a single section in the work (as will be further described below), and second, one 'preposition' (the 'ablative' [ta],

[sa], or [tɕia]), is not treated at all. In the following section, we hope to address these two shortcomings in describing the same basic system that is described in *Ways*.

## NOMINAL GRAMMATICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN HUÁNGSHŨI CHINESE

In the following section, we describe along functional lines the syntactic phenomenon *Ways* describes, while correcting the two shortcomings noted above. We shall refrain from using the word 'preposition' in our description of the salient grammatical markers, because the term implies that the constituent is 'positioned before' the noun phrase. In the dialect in question, the constituent consistently follows the noun phrase, and so we will refer to them as 'postpositions'. The Chinese term, *jiècí* 介词 means something like 'mediating term' and thereby avoids the problem of position in relation to the noun phrase. In English and in the grammar of Standard Chinese, these 'mediating terms' are positioned before the noun phrase, so the translation as 'preposition' is entirely reasonable for Standard Chinese.

Henceforth, we shall refer to the object of study as Huángshǔi Chinese. It refers to that sub-group of Qīnghǎi Chinese dialects spoken in Píng'ān, Hùzhù, Dàtōng, Huángzhōng, Huángyuán, Guǐdé, and the city of Xīníng. This designation follows Zhāng (1984) in identifying the sub-dialect based on lexical and phonological correspondences. We believe that the system we describe below is comprehensible throughout this region, though there is significant variation in the production of the dialect due to historical and demographic factors. Specifically, among educated speakers in the city of Xīníng, certain of these features are less likely to be realized. Indeed, there is the possibility, as yet to be confirmed, that the old Xīníng

dialect is significantly different from its neighbors in the realization of this system, which is certainly the result of the urban center's peculiar socio-cultural history.

In short, there are three postpositions to be described individually below, that form the system of 'mediating terms' in the dialect. These terms occur in isolation, or frequently in tandem with prepositions. It is our contention that in all cases these postpositions are the result of contact with non-Sinitic languages spoken in the region since the fifteenth century. The significance of this claim will be addressed in the final section.

### *The Anti-Ergative [xa]*

The first postposition discussed in *Ways* is [xa] 哈, but which *Ways* says alternates with [a] 啊; the former more common in the countryside, the latter more typical of urban Xíníng. The first part of *Ways'* description follows the standard understanding of the postposition; that it functions to mark pre-verbal objects, in much the same way that *bǎ* 把 marks the disposal in Standard Chinese (SC). The following examples from *Ways* demonstrate this function:

1. 他我哈吓给了一跳  
3<sup>rd</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> [xa] scare give ASP one MW  
He gave me quite a scare.
2. 我请假的理由哈一挂说了。  
1<sup>st</sup> ask leave PRT reason [xa] all tell ASP  
I completely explained my reason for asking for leave.

As *Ways* points out, either of these examples could be restated in the dialect replacing the postposition with the preposition [pa<sup>3</sup>] 把 and the meaning would not be affected.



*Ways* also points out that the usual restrictions that are found with *bǎ* in SC are not found in the use of [pa<sup>3</sup>] in Xīníng. For example:

3. 再 你 把 你 坐 着!

now 2<sup>nd</sup> [pa] 2<sup>nd</sup> sit ASP

You sit (as a host might say to a guest after a meal when the guest tries to help with cleaning up).

4. 你 把 我 没 气 死

2<sup>nd</sup> [pa] 1<sup>st</sup> haven't anger death

You didn't make me so angry that I could die.

These examples show that [pa<sup>3</sup>] 把 in Xīníng, and perhaps in other areas of northwest China, does not behave as it does in SC. SC *bǎ* should involve some kind of 'disposal' of the noun phrase following *bǎ*, but that is not the case in either of these sentences. Further, SC *bǎ* is not supposed to include a negative adverb in the main predicate (if there is a negative adverb, it is supposed to precede the *bǎ*), but this rule is clearly violated in Example 4.

The description of the function of [xa] in *Ways* is accurate and accords with the common understanding of the postposition. Unfortunately, *Ways* lists other functions of [xa] in an entirely different section of the paper. For example, under 'expressing give/ transfer' (*biǎo gěiyǔ* 表给与) we find the following examples:

5. 你 的 书 我 哈 看 给 一 挂

2<sup>nd</sup> Prt book 1<sup>st</sup> [xa] look give MW

Let me have a look at your book.

6. 你 我 哈 帮 着 找 给 一 间 房 子

2<sup>nd</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> [xa] help ASP look give one MW house

Help me look for a house.

In these examples [xa] marks the noun phrase towards which the object is transferred (Example 5), or on whose behalf the action of the verb is done (Example 6).

The following examples from *Ways* are listed under 'expressing passive' (*biǎo bèidòng* 表被动):

7. 我哈雨泡了个透

1<sup>st</sup> [xa] rain soak ASP MW through

I was soaked through by the rain

8. 肉哈狗抬走了

meat [xa] dog carry go ASP

The meat was carried away by the dog.

Whether these are 'passive constructions' is open to discussion, but it is clear they only differ from examples 1 and 2 above in the relative order of the patient and the agent. We contend that by foregrounding the patient in examples 7 and 8 the speaker draws discourse focus to this entity. This is similar to the passive construction in other languages.

These other functions of [xa] suggest it is significantly different from SC *bǎ*. *Ways* makes an effort to account for this wider function, saying:

... *Wǒ yǐwéi, hái bùrú kànzuo jiècí biǎodáyì de yǔzhùcí.*

...我以为，还不如看作介词表达义的语助词。

'...I think that it's better to consider it a mood particle (?) that expresses prepositional meanings.'

The question mark after 'mood particle' (*yǔzhùcí* 语助词) indicates our doubt about the meaning of this term. [xa] is certainly not a mood particle, and yet that is what the term *yǔzhùcí* usually means. We find this explanation dissatisfying.

Dede (2007b) addressed this wider function of [xa], suggesting that all of the functions are derived from a single marker, which originally may have developed under the influence of the Amdo Tibetan 'anti-ergative'. Dede (2007b) further describes the mechanism by which this feature came to be used in Huángshǔi Chinese. The story is quite complicated but, in short, it probably mixed with both an innate Chinese preverbal pause particle and the *bǎ* construction, creating a unique response to a complex linguistic environment.

*Comitative/ Instrumental [lia]/ [la]*

The second Huángshǔi Chinese postposition described in *Ways* is [lia] 俩/ [la] 啦 which, to the best of our knowledge, was first described in English in Dwyer (1992), although the existence of the variation between [lia] and [la] is not mentioned there. Variation between [lia] and [la] is not described elsewhere. The comitative/ instrumental function of this postposition is relatively straightforward and uncontroversial. Consider the following examples from *Ways*:

9. 我钢笔俩写惯了，毛笔俩写不来

1<sup>st</sup> fountain pen [lia] write accustomed ASP brush

[lia] write not come

I'm used to writing with a fountain pen; I can't write with a brush.

10. 你谁俩来了?

2<sup>nd</sup> who [lia] come ASP

Who did you come with?

Example 9 demonstrates the instrumental use of [lia], while Example 10 demonstrates the comitative function. Dwyer

(1992) points out the similarities between the form and function of this postposition and the Monguor postposition [-la]. This conclusion is entirely reasonable, and we thus will not add to it.

*Ways* helpfully includes examples of this postposition's function as a marker for quasi-comparatives, such as:

11. 天气热着就象火啦烧着  
weather hot ASP just like fire [la] burn ASP  
The weather is burning hot.

This function is similar to the use of the SC pattern *gēn... yíyàng* 跟... 一样. As far as we know, it was not described prior to *Ways*.

### *Ablative [ta]/ [tɕia]/ [sa]*

The most significant shortcoming found in *Ways* is the lack of description of the ablative postposition [ta]/ [tɕia]/ [sa] found in numerous varieties of Huángshǔi Chinese. Dede (1999b) first described this postposition in English, which occurs alone or in tandem with a preposition, as the following examples demonstrate:

12. [tɕia<sup>2</sup>] 夜来个儿 兰州 [tɕia] 来 俩  
3<sup>rd</sup> yesterday Lánzhōu [tɕia] come ASP  
He came up from Lánzhōu yesterday.
13. 他昨天从北京[tɕia]来了。  
3<sup>rd</sup> yesterday from Běijīng [tɕia] came ASP  
He came from Běijīng yesterday.

In addition to demonstrating the function of the ablative postposition [tɕia], these examples also demonstrate the

immense amount of lexical variation in the dialect, as evidenced by the two forms for the third person pronoun ([tɕia<sup>2</sup>] and [tʰa<sup>1</sup>] 他) and the two forms for the word yesterday ([j<sup>4</sup> lɛ<sup>2-3</sup> kɔ ɛ] 夜来个儿 and [tsu<sup>2</sup> tiā<sup>1</sup>] 昨天).

Examples 12 and 13 were gathered in 1996 from ethnically Hàn speakers of Huángshǔi Chinese. Subsequent fieldwork in the region confirms the use of this postposition in the speech of ethnically Hàn, Huí, and Tibetan speakers of the dialect. The wide amount of variation in the realization of this feature (between [ta], [tɕia], and [sa]) suggests its value as a dialect variable operating below speakers' consciousness. For this reason, it proved to be a useful measure of the speed at which the dialect is adapting to influence from Standard Chinese (Dede 1999a). Most importantly, this feature is another clear example of the influence of non-Sinitic influence on the syntax of the dialect. The variant [sa] is identical to the ablative marker in Monguor, from which it most certainly derives (Ibid).

#### *Other 'Prepositions'*

In addition to these postpositions, the equivalents of SC prepositional expressions are found in Huángshǔi Chinese, often with the same SC preposition, or with a widely used dialectal variant of it. For example, the basic locative function is fulfilled by the SC locative preposition [tsɛ<sup>4</sup>] 在, or with a widely used variant [tɛ<sup>4</sup>] (transcribed as 呆, 代 or 帶) which is interchangeable with the SC variant. The following examples are from *Ways*:

14. 娃娃们 呆 院院里 耍着  
children [tɛ<sup>4</sup>] courtyard play ASP  
The children are playing in the yard.

15. 阿达 呆 山上 割 田着

father [tɛ<sup>4</sup>] mountain cut field ASP

Dad is in the mountains harvesting wheat.

Syntactically, this pattern is the same as SC, differing only in the form of the locative preposition. The variation between the dialectal [tɛ<sup>4</sup>] and the SC [tsɛ<sup>4</sup>] is also a valuable measure of the degree to which the Huángshǔi community has changed its speech in response to influence from SC.

In sum, the functional equivalents of SC prepositional phrases are realized in Huángshǔi Chinese through a combination of prepositional, postpositional, and prepositional-postpositional hybrid patterns. These latter two strategies are unique among Chinese dialects, and constitute the phenomenon most in need of explanation. It is our contention that the use of postpositions in this manner is the direct result of language contact in the Qīnghǎi region between Chinese dialects and non-Sinitic languages, primarily Monguor and Amdo Tibetan, both of which employ postpositions for the functions described above.

## CONCLUSIONS

Two important lessons may be drawn from this review of *Ways* and the expression of prepositional functions in Huángshǔi Chinese. First, over the past twenty years, most research on these dialects has focused on the topics raised in *Ways* and supplemented in this essay. We believe that the sum total of this work constitutes a fairly complete description of the function of noun phrases in the dialect syntax. However, until now, there has been inadequate description and explanation of verb phrase syntax in Huángshǔi Chinese. A good start was achieved with Zhāng Ānshēng's 张安生 (2007) description of the use of a

reported speech particle in the speech of Huí people in the region, but which is also widespread among other language communities in Qīnghǎi. We believe the next important contribution to the study of Huángshǔi Chinese will come in the form of a complete description of the verb phrase, with particular attention to the tense-aspect system. This description will also have to address the question of the role language contact played in the development of that system. *Ways*, in its description of noun phrase syntax, makes clearer the necessity of that final piece.

The second lesson is that this language contact phenomenon is clear evidence of long-standing influence from non-Sinitic languages on the development of this particular Chinese dialect. The socio-cultural context that breeds such linguistic interference is one in which these various speech communities co-existed in close proximity for a long time. At some point in the development of the dialect, many speakers were probably bi- or trilingual. The cultural exchange manifest in this linguistic evidence speaks to a period of relatively peaceful coexistence among communities of people, now considered separate ethnic groups. We consider this a valuable historical lesson, particularly in light of the contemporary ethnic situation, and a lesson particularly well-suited for all researchers of China, past and present.

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